

My name is Cara, and I'm writing not only as a single visually impaired user of mobile technologies but as the list owner / moderator of both the VIPhone and MacVisionaries email lists.

I mention this as there are not only hundreds of visually impaired users like myself on these lists, but also because the list's' content is mainly centered around Apple products because of their truly welcome and liberating level of access to the blind / visually impaired community. Apple is showing an absolutely steadfast commitment to continuing and promoting this access.

As others have said, I really feel that other providers of mobile technologies could not only benefit from considering Apple's take on accessibility for all, but also that the FCC itself might wish to consider this as well when adopting new standards in this new century and millennium.

Rather than spending this note only touting Apple's approach though, I'd simply like to address a few points which were for me, steppingstones as it were, on the way to my current viewpoint.

Firstly, in this time of absolutely mind-boggling progress which we see every day in the form of new technologies and innovations, the idea that people with disabilities are barred from using the latest technologies would be one which would stun the average person on the street so to speak.

However, this is exactly what is happening in even something as simple as a mobile phone. the fact that people with visual disabilities are being asked to be content with mobile technology that is several years out of date is in no small way not only outrageous but downright debilitating.

Now I'm most certainly not vilifying any particular cellular providers or phone manufacturers here, but I am saying that it is simply a necessity for people with disabilities to be able to keep up with their 'non-disabled' counterparts. Not being able to do this separates one from society. This is, in effect, a form of segregation. While this is certainly an unintentional side effect to be sure, it is all the same, a

very important idea to consider.

In this world of rapidly changing technology, being behind the curve so to speak already leaves one at a disadvantage, and despite all of the good intentions a provider might have in offering an out-of-date phone to a disabled customer simply because it may be the only one they can offer as being accessible, The result still leaves that customer behind their coworkers, friends or family whom may not share their disability, and may thusly in essence be miles ahead of them in terms of the kind of technologies they can regularly be using on a daily basis.

this takes me to my next point; what can a disabled cell phone user do to have the latest technology made accessible to them? Well, an imperfect solution, in the case of one with a visual impairment, would be to buy a phone which supports screen reading (text to speech) technology.

Three very important issues come up here:

1 will the screen reader work on the phone the user would like? So often, access technologies like this are created by third party companies which can cause their products not to work on the newest phones. this isn't always the case, but it is still significant enough of an issue to discuss here. the only way to make an intelligent purchase of a phone is to see, first, whether or not it will work with the screen reader you have in mind. -And, if it doesn't, then you're in exactly the same position as above. I.E. You need to purchase old technology simply because it's all that will work with the screen reader you need so that you can use your phone like everyone else takes for granted.

2 Will the screen reader do what you need? Many times,screen reading technology may only offer partial access to a phone's features or imperfect, unreliable access. This can leave a user trying to employ difficult or complicated work-arounds for these issues that a non-disabled person might be able to easily accomplish at a glance, in mere seconds.

3 Once you decide on a phone and a screen reader can you afford it? Most current screen reading technologies for mobile products will cost a user several hundred dollars. Add this to the cost of a phone, and you can see how this is prohibitive to say the least. Even paying an extra hundred dollars after the price of a phone (as is sometimes the case with ATT's offerings of out-of-date phones as above) can greatly impact a user's ability to afford a workable phone. -And, in a world where mobile technology is getting more affordable for the general non-disabled consumer, this is just simply unacceptable. We simply can't in good conscience, continue on like this.

In our current environment, information is in essence a commodity. Being able to access info is of the utmost importance. Even something as simple as being able to easily send or read a bit of info like a text message to a family member can be indispensable. this is ubiquitous but not for many people with disabilities. Even this simple act which most cell phone users take for granted is either not supported at all or not fully supported in most cell phones. Even with third party access technologies, dealing with this simple act can be problematic.

This isn't even mentioning the idea of sending / receiving email or surfing the web etc.

This is not simply a case of a minority group wanting all the latest cool gadgets so that they can be like their hip friends. This is a case of society growing rapidly and becoming more and more dependent on the free flow of information. The technologies to accomplish and support this are changing every day. -And thusly, it is vitally important that all segments of people be included in this in order to continue being active, contributing members in our modern evolving world.

This is simply a necessity and by no means an exaggeration. As well, though, this is also a perfect opportunity. This torrent of change is truly a tremendous fertile ground for new and innovative developments and mindsets which can literally grow equality.

this is not just about technology, this is about where we stand in society. I'd posit that mobile

technologies are so prevalent at this point, as I've said above, that they are not only ubiquitous but are necessary and are only becoming more so every day. So I'd suggest the following:

1 In regard to cellular phone manufacturers, consider Apple's model of access for all. This is truly a prime example of a good, inclusive concept in real, day-to-day action. It's working for users and it's working for the company, and has opened many doors to people with disabilities, to give us access that we very much need, and that many had not thought possible.

If a company can make their technology accessible to the widest audience in a truly meaningful way, right from the start, it not only helps the user greatly, but helps the company as well. They now have a market they may not have had before. The user need not be forced into purchasing technology that is several years out-of-date, nor do they need to try to finance a third party screen reading solution which may not fully work or provide only partial access as is so often the case.

2 Encourage cellular providers to offer the latest phones if they have assistance programs for the disabled where they may assist in offering screen reading technologies to users at 'more affordable' fees. Simply put, being behind the curve, is not feasible at this point. It is societal segregation in essence, and thusly is something we really need to look at and address. Now is a wonderful time **THAT WE CAN DO THIS.**

3 Prevent phone manufacturers and cellular providers from barring access to their products, whether by design or lack of education. Two recent examples of this come to mind.

Apparently the upcoming Windows Phone 7 will not only have no built-in access for the visually impaired, but will also not support third party screen reader manufacturers in their development of assistive technologies. This will render phones which run this flavor of Windows completely inaccessible to the blind and visually impaired. This illustrates my point above, in that the latest technology is out of reach simply because one may not be able to see. This simply doesn't need to happen, and as I've said, should not happen. There's just no reason for this in light of the kinds of

creativity and resources which are readily available now, to easily surmount these issues.

Some versions of Google's Android OS have features which support access to people with visual impairments, disabled. Again, this leaves the user being barred from accessing the latest technology that any sighted person can simply go into a store, purchase, and easily use. So once again, the concept that a device needs to allow access features at the very least, is obviously of the utmost importance.

I hope what I've said here makes sense and gives you an idea of the true, real, day-to-day importance of mobile access for all. Being left out of the information flow of society at this point, as one goes about their day is simply tantamount to being excluded from a vital societal activity. Whether this be for work play or education, we all need to be a giving and receiving part of this flow between each other. this flow right now, is digital. this gives us wonderful opportunities for equal access. We need to allow and encourage these. We need to promote digital equality and define it as the necessity that it truly is in the world now.